

## Reading as 'social glue'?: Book Groups, Multiculture, and the Small Island Read 2007

Fuller, Danielle; Procter, J

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Fuller, D & Procter, J 2009, 'Reading as 'social glue'?: Book Groups, Multiculture, and the Small Island Read 2007', *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 26-40.  
<<http://www.movingworlds.net/volumes/9/RegionWritingHome.php>>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

### General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

### Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

Fuller, Danielle and James Procter. 2009  
'Reading as "social glue"?: Book Groups,  
Multiculture, and Small Island Read 2007.'

'Region/Writing/Home: Relocating Black,  
Migrant and Diasporic Writing in Britain.'  
Special Issue Moving Worlds: A Journal of  
Transcultural Writings, edited by Corinne  
Fowler and Graham Mort. 9.2: 26-40.

.

Version : published version

Date : 2009

## Reading as 'social glue'? Book Groups, Multiculture, and the *Small Island* Read 2007

DANIELLE FULLER & JAMES PROCTER

Well, it's [*Small Island*] linking people who come here isn't it, it's their history isn't it, their personal history. So it's – we've all got connections to other cultures, particularly in this city [Liverpool], and it's like a bridge. (Linda, 'Liverpool Reads' participant)<sup>1</sup>

Um, 'social glue' I think was the word that we, we came up with, the words that we came up with, that we thought it was a, a kind of social glue. And the difficulty with *Small Island* was, because it's not, umm, necessarily a crossover book. (Beccy Jones, Bluecoat Arts Centre, Liverpool)<sup>2</sup>

In 2007 Andrea Levy's award-winning novel, *Small Island* (2004), was selected for the UK's largest-ever mass-reading event. What cultural work was the novel assumed to perform by the organizers, sponsors, and institutions associated with this event? Were they in tension with the ways that actual readers responded to the novel? Can a fictional bestseller that evokes the *Windrush* generation encourage contemporary readers to share, or even resolve, not only their different perspectives on *Small Island*, but also their perspectives on cultural difference? How should we understand the relationship between a piece of internationally-acclaimed, metropolitan fiction, and a local readership in the North West of England? Focusing on Liverpool, which was one of the four city sites of *Small Island* Read 2007, our essay explores these questions by drawing on selected data gathered from two large-scale collaborative research projects funded by the AHRC, 'Beyond the Book' and 'Devolving Diasporas'.<sup>3</sup> The material we analyse includes official documents, press releases, and statements issued by several agencies involved in the event. We also consider recorded focus group and book group conversations with a variety of UK readers, the majority of whom live in Liverpool.

Liverpool is a multiracial port city in which more than 60 languages are spoken. With a current population of 436,100, the city is home to Europe's longest-established Chinese community,<sup>4</sup> but its ties with the peoples of the African diaspora are even older because of the city's historical (and infamous) role within the transatlantic slave trade. As Linda suggests in the opening quotation, many contemporary Liverpudlians

have historical, familial or social 'connections' to more than one cultural community dwelling within the city limits. However, the multicultural demographic of Liverpool is rarely signified within popular representations of the city either within or outside the UK. For example, the celebratory discourses of arrival and beginning, that are ritually associated with the London-centred narrative of the *SS Empire Windrush* docking at Tilbury in June 1948 with its cargo of 492 West Indian emigrants, consistently overshadow the race riots that took place in Liverpool just two months later. As James Procter has argued elsewhere, 'these disturbances, concerning the large numbers of black seamen who had come to settle in the city during the war, signal the presence of alternative beginnings and earlier arrivals.'<sup>5</sup> At stake here is an elision that is both historical and geographical: if, within the symbolic discourses of multiculturalism, London remains an emphatic epicentre, this partly depends upon a recurring sense of the north and other regional settings as being *beyond* migration and diaspora. Thus, Liverpool's international image has, until very recently, been primarily secured by the city's association with successful football clubs, The Beatles, and working-class poverty. Such representations are never far away from national nostalgias about local community, neighbourhood, and social solidarity, invocations of which often refer, either implicitly or explicitly, to homogenous 'white' populations. These kinds of contradictions between Liverpool as at once *prior* to the *Windrush* yet peripheral to diaspora, were, we shall see, played out during *Small Island* Reads 2007.

The Liverpool-based co-ordinators situated in 'The Reader' office had previously organized two successful city-wide reading events of their own ('Liverpool Reads') and, because of their extensive work with socially and economically marginalized groups, were fully aware of divisions within their city community.<sup>6</sup> As Beccy Jones notes in the epigraph above, and as Jane Davis, founder of 'The Reader' organization, has often remarked in press statements, the concept of a city-wide event favoured by the 'Liverpool Reads' committee was underwritten by the idea of shared reading as a type of 'social glue'.<sup>7</sup> This conceptualization implies a desire to bring people across the city of Liverpool together by offering the common ground of a single book, perhaps with the aim of healing those social divisions. However, as we demonstrate in this essay, these well-intentioned goals are at odds with some of the aims and structures shaping the larger-scale *Small Island* Read project, and also with the logic of dominant discourses of multiculturalism operating in the UK. For instance, what kind of erasures and assumptions might be involved in

prescribing a London-produced, metropolitan novel to a 'local' Liverpoolian readership despite that city's own long and rich history of postwar Caribbean and black British writing? In order to address this question, our essay will make a distinction between the rhetoric of multiculturalism – as it is sanctioned at an official level, and was reproduced in the publicity statements around *Small Island Reads 2007* – and Paul Gilroy's notion of 'multiculture', which describes informal, vernacular expressions of cross-cultural connection that are arguably closer to the local readings of *Small Island* considered in the final section of the essay.

### Local sites/national structures: situating the tensions of *Small Island Reads*

We have quoted above Beccy Jones's statement that *Small Island* was not a 'crossover book'. Given our concerns in this essay, it is tempting to interpret her phrase as referring to a book's capacity to appeal to different cultural communities, thereby supplying the 'social glue' that might foster stronger relationships among the city's diverse groups. However, Jones, who was part of the original 'Liverpool Reads' committee, is making a more nuanced point which is that book selection is key to the programme achieving any kind of connection among the city's readers. She notes here that the choice of an adult novel for the 2007 'Liverpool Reads' represented a deviation from the programme's preferred genre. 'Liverpool Reads 2006', for example, focused upon *Millions* by the Liverpoolian author, Frank Cottrell Boyce, a novel intended primarily for school-aged children, but one which can also be enjoyed by adults.<sup>8</sup> *Millions* is also the only 'Liverpool Reads' selection to date to have been written by a local writer, from which we can infer that celebrating Liverpool's literary talent is not necessarily an aim of the programme. This situation is, however, typical of many 'One Book, One Community' city-wide reading initiatives in the UK and in North America. While not all programmes share Liverpool's emphasis on involving schools and young people from diverse communities, organizers frequently select books because they articulate themes, issues, and ideas that are pertinent to the inhabitants of a locale and, crucially, because they have the potential to appeal to male and female readers across different age groups.<sup>9</sup> Since 'Liverpool Reads 2007' was part of a larger-scale programme – *Small Island Read 2007* – the selection of Levy's novel was not even made by the Liverpool organizers but by Bristol Cultural Development Partnership, the team who have successfully run Bristol's 'Great Reading Adventure' since 2003.

Nevertheless, the choice of a mainstream, best-selling migrant narrative with a predominantly London setting might seem odd, given that the partner cities in *Small Island Read* were Bristol, Glasgow, Hull and Liverpool. Arguably, the choice reinforces an ideology that posits London as the apotheosis of the culturally sophisticated 'multicultural' metropolis. However, as we shall see below, many of the participating Liverpoolian readers move with consummate and apparently untroubled ease between local, metropolitan, and national landscapes in their accounts.

While the selection of Levy's novel plays into discursive tensions about the location of 'multicultural Britain', further contradictions arise from the ambiguous private/public situation and political efficacy of another site materialized by *Small Island Read*, namely, the book group. If the image of the solitary reader has been historically dominant since medieval times, the emergence of book groups during the nineteenth century suggests a dramatic alternative to commonsense notions of reading as a private, individual, silent, and cognitive act.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the phenomenal success of book groups in contemporary Britain, Canada, and the USA indicates that many readers pursue reading as a social, communal, public and conversational activity. Even if they do not always result in a meeting of minds, book groups involve a social gathering, a physical, face-to-face encounter, or a virtual, online meeting that ensures no reader is an island.<sup>11</sup> Book group discussion is typically intersectional, involving processes such as cross-cultural identification, and the sharing of perspectives and interpretations in a process that is both collaborative and dialogic. Certainly, there is evidence in the groups we have worked with that book discussions can create a meeting place for intergenerational understanding, or construct an ideological common ground by articulating and reflecting upon previously internalized values and attitudes about 'race', class, and gender. The identity work that readers undertake in the act of shared reading can even involve making connections among these 'categories', as well as interrogating how and why those categories have been formalized through educational institutions, societal norms, economic structures and the legacies of British imperial histories.

In other ways, however, the book group formation seems stubbornly resistant to the kinds of cross-cultural meeting we might wish to associate with progressive political action. Book groups tend to divide along the lines of ethnicity and gender, if not generation, so that relatively homogenous gatherings (for example, all-male and all-female groups) predominate. Equally, there is evidence to suggest that book groups often exert exclusionary practices, deterring or being suspicious of new

members.<sup>12</sup> Given their typical demographics, the political limits of contemporary book groups as sites of ideological transformation might seem glaringly obvious. The shared reading of *Small Island* in book groups offers no guarantees that any kind of transformative meeting will occur. Nevertheless, book group readers together constitute a large and all too easily neglected interpretive community for Levy's text. We believe that ignoring this reading community would itself be a politically irresponsible act. In what follows, we offer a critique of the *Small Island Read* event by approaching it from two perspectives: first, in terms of how the groups were depicted in official documents and statements (that is, in methodological terms), we investigate *Small Island Read* from 'above' and from the standpoint of its organizing agencies; and, second, we consider how actual readers on the ground responded to the text in group conversations and interviews.

### ***Small Island Read*: rhetoric and representation**

*Small Island Read 2007* was the largest mass-reading event ever held in the UK. Running from 11 January to 31 March 2007, it involved the distribution of 50,000 free copies of Andrea Levy's novel, along with 80,000 copies of a glossy A5 readers' guide. It generated 100 separate events (including library talks, book group discussions, competitions, exhibitions), and 60 school workshops. Drawing on earlier mass-reading initiatives in Liverpool and Bristol, and integrating Glasgow and Hull as new partner cities, the event was centred around, but moved beyond, four locations with clear links to the slave trade.<sup>13</sup> The declared aims of the event were as follows:

- To develop standards of literacy through the promotion of reading.
- To stimulate new forms of creativity inspired by the reading experience.
- To use reading to facilitate learning about the past.
- To bring diverse communities together through the act of reading and thereby foster a sense of shared identity.<sup>14</sup>

Within this official agenda, the book is asked to operate as a hinge between 'the past' (slavery and its abolition; postwar immigration) and the present (contemporary multicultural diversity). As the funders articulated it in a joint statement: 'Remembering the victims of the slave trade is essential in everyone's lives. Just as important is celebrating the diversity of the modern city.'<sup>15</sup> Second, and more precisely, it is the reader and 'the act of reading' *Small Island* that is envisaged as a kind of pull string, capable of drawing diverse reading communities together and 'foster[ing] a shared identity'.

This goal of historical and communal cohesion is perhaps most clearly

and coherently embodied in the visual archive housed on the *Small Island Read 2007* website, where dozens of photographs depicting assembled readers serve to perform and stage the act of reading the novel.<sup>16</sup> The collected subjects holding or surrounding copies of the book appear to personify the diversity and multiculturalism which the sponsors of the mass-reading event would like *Small Island* to perform. The book as a material artefact comes to represent a physical meeting place, drawing communities of difference together. Most notable here is the exclusive emphasis on the depiction of inclusiveness and diversity with reference to ethnicity but also through the combination and juxtaposition of different classes, generations, and sexes. Glaswegian bus drivers are depicted brandishing free paperback editions of *Small Island* alongside a photograph of uniformed schoolgirls with copies of the same text. Collectively these images concretize the slogan adopted by many of the community-based reading programmes involved in the project: 'reading as social glue'.

To what extent are these images and the rhetoric undermined or contradicted by the event itself? The evaluation report tells us that the majority of readers were middle class, 72 per cent were female, 91 per cent white. There is nothing particularly surprising about this. Indeed, the notable homogeneity of the reading group as an Anglo-American social formation means that these statistics point to a *relative* diversity. Certainly there was a concerted and laudable effort on the part of the event organizers to bring together different participants. Among the events programmed for *Small Island Read*/ 'Liverpool Reads', for example, were a reading group at the Caribbean community centre; a creative writing project with young Somalis; a reading group at the Asylum Link; a Youth Project run by refugee artists, and a drama project with young people from the Yemeni Arabic community. Nevertheless, these initiatives were fraught with problems and ultimately highlighted some of the limitations of the mass-read project as a community-wide activity. They include the difficulties involved in providing sufficient numbers of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) support workers; the non-availability of *Small Island* in languages other than English; issues of illiteracy among some groups within the city, and racist remarks in reading group discussions, which threatened the possibility of cross-racial reading groups.

In this context, events like *Small Island Read* provide a glimpse of the limitations of state-sanctioned multiculturalism. The main national sponsors of *Small Island Read* were Arts Council England and the Heritage Lottery Fund. Viewed sceptically, the images and rhetoric outlined above

might be said to 'tick boxes' to secure financial support from sponsors with a public commitment to corporate multiculturalism, and/or to demonstrate that the money has been 'well spent'.<sup>17</sup> From this perspective, the photographic images of *Small Island* as a meeting place of cultural diversity operate as 'proof' of an easily achieved and celebratory multiculturalism, and as a visual shorthand that conceals the challenges and contingencies of actually-existing 'multiculture'. In *After Empire*, Paul Gilroy uses the term 'multiculture', as opposed to multiculturalism, to describe the kind of spontaneous, precarious, and provisional cross-cultural interactions he sees emerging in contemporary British culture.<sup>18</sup> Multiculture is not something that can be sanctioned or prescribed from above. Instead Gilroy conceptualizes it as erupting erratically in the vernacular formations of everyday life. If the actual readers of *Small Island* cannot be said to read entirely outside the more programmatic logic of the event's official rhetoric (a logic which suggests reading *Small Island* necessarily achieves 'diversity'), they offer a more complex picture of cultural *reception* (as both hermeneutics and hospitality) that is arguably closer to multiculture than multiculturalism.

### Meeting-places: reading *Small Island* together

While some of the readers we worked with found the multi-voiced narrative of *Small Island* difficult to follow and an obstacle to their initial engagement with the text, many were pulled into the plot and the world of Levy's novel through the characters of Queenie, Bernard, Gilbert and Hortense. Identification with these fictional figures, or lack of it, makes up a substantial part of the talk on and around *Small Island* that we have analysed so far. As one white reader noted of the novel during a focus group discussion in Liverpool:

It just adds to the actual history doesn't it, you know to to read from a human perspective I suppose ... It adds humanity, it adds um – you know you, you can read about things and say, 'Oh that's so awful' ... and it, and it, or something, you know – but to actually read from a – about things from a human perspective, of a character that's been created, then I think you can be, well, truly moved, in a way that just reading about the history – and it can be when you read about the history as well but it just adds that extra humanity.<sup>19</sup>

This reader reminds us of the extent to which the individual voices of the novel serve to profoundly personalize the historical narrative in ways that encourage readerly identification. (Perhaps the centrality of character in *Small Island* is one reason for the novel's popularity with book groups and other non-academic readers.) On one level, the connection between

the novel and 'history' seems to reiterate the framing of the novel for the *Small Island Read* event, which contextualized *Small Island* in terms of the history of British slavery and postwar immigration. However, this reader also suggests that engaging with Levy's fictional work involves *more than* 'just reading about the history' with its dispassionate or merely gestural empathy: 'Oh that's so awful.' Reading *Small Island*-as-fiction, this reader suggests, has the capacity to elicit a personal and human response, to be 'truly moved'. If such an emotive account might be said to mystify the actual identity-work being done through the act of reading, it also captures the more elusive, less accountable, and programmatic perspectives that have emerged in the recorded conversations around *Small Island*.

Below is a conversation between a group of women readers, also based in Liverpool, as they reflect approvingly upon the 'realistic' and 'detailed' descriptions of Queenie and Hortense. In common with women's book groups featured in other scholarly studies, these readers privilege a mimetic reading practice in order to find points of identification with fictional characters, and with their own lives.<sup>20</sup> As their discussion proceeds, these women admire Hortense's self-presentation as a respectable, educated woman who, at first, does not appear to notice the everyday racism that she encounters in 1940s London. Within their analysis of Hortense's attitudes and behaviour, class is foregrounded until one reader suggests how the experience of migration might produce disappointment in a newly arrived immigrant through the disillusion of expectations and desires that have been founded on (colonialist?) stereotypes of the receiving culture:

S4 She's aspiring to better things isn't she? She hasn't really got anything to be that way about but she's aspiring to live a better life and have better things isn't she?

S1 She's very judgemental though isn't she? Everybody else you know does everything wrong

S2 I think I might be like her if I went to live there somewhere in Africa and I've got my idea of Africans busy eating mangos in the sunshine (laughter)<sup>21</sup>

In their efforts to make sense of Hortense's actions and opinions, these readers move towards a creative re-reading of the text, imagining themselves into an analogous situation where cultural and racial difference is handled through stereotypes, while remaining sensitive to their material effects. (Elsewhere they discuss Hortense coming up against institutionalized racism, for instance.) It is not easy to 'read off' from this conversation a positive encounter between (white, Liverpoolian) reader and (West Indian) character, assuming we could know what such an encounter might look like. For example, there is no obvious attempt by

these readers to distance themselves from or to denounce racial stereotypes but instead a more risky parodying of them which, depending on how you read it, stresses the absurdity of stereotype (which provokes knowing laughter) or reinforces it (by provoking ignorant laughter). Within a long established book group such as this, where trust among members is firm and readers feel able to voice their opinions safely, it nevertheless appears possible to activate the text as a meeting-place for critical reflection, with some readers approving of Hortense's personality, others disapproving, others changing their minds in an open, dialogic, and ultimately inconclusive conversation.

Transcripts from other group discussions of Levy's novel, and from focus groups with readers in and beyond Liverpool, suggest that a common element of reader response is a consideration of what, if anything, has changed about race relations and racist attitudes in the UK.<sup>22</sup> For a reading group in Chepstow, discussion about the title and its possible reference to 'small-mindedness' prompted this type of response. Meanwhile, Anne, a white middle-aged woman in a Liverpool focus group, was particularly affected by Gilbert's experiences of racism:

[Gilbert] eventually is stationed over in Britain, and at that point you get the, sort of, the interaction with the white British and the different reactions. Again some of them really, enbarrassingly, shaming I thought, from my point of view being, you know, a white British person, and ... I, I found it very difficult at times to read it and accept that it still goes on in some ways. This is it, all, all through the book you get the, sort of, this is what happened then. In some ways it's not so different to now, um, in terms of attitude, very often.<sup>23</sup>

Within the context of a racially mixed focus group, it is possible that Anne may have felt compelled to offer this self-aware commentary in order to demonstrate her own tolerance. However, Anne's discomfort and her recognition that racism 'still goes on in some ways' was not atypical.

Readers also made connections between slavery and the present-day use of child labour as well as relating the discrimination suffered by Gilbert and Hortense to the introduction of citizenship tests. They also discussed the representation of new immigrants and asylum seekers in tabloid newspapers as evidence that many attitudes have not shifted, and engaged in discussion of the economic basis of empire and colonial expansion, discussions which segued into considerations of outsourcing to Indian call centres. Admittedly, most of the readers in our studies knew that the selection of *Small Island* was intended to coincide with the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade, but this factor suggests that framing the community-wide read in this way helped to foreground

the contemporary relevance of the novel and thus prompted readers to use a fictional story set in the past to debate current political and social issues. Kerry, an African-Caribbean woman in her late thirties, recognized the potential of this text to unsettle racist assumptions within what Tracey, another focus group participant from the African-Caribbean community in Liverpool, had described as a racially segregated city. She also noted the importance of highlighting the work of a black British writer through the 'Liverpool Reads' / *Small Island Read* programmes – a trenchant reminder that the most visible aspects of British arts and culture within the media and on the high street are still those produced by white elites:

Martin said, you know, if we're talking about breaking down barriers and stuff, we need to tackle ignorance, um, and, and, you know, wild assumptions. And also, you know, let people – because I think that sometimes, people go out of the way to be racist, because of the hatred they've got in themselves. Sometimes people think – do it out of ignorance and if they had the information maybe, they'd think twice about it. You know, so, the – uh, I think [*Small Island*] is useful for breaking down barriers. And it's also great that a black author's been recognised at this level. You know, we've got the whole city – well, readers in the city – reading a book, um ... So I'm quite proud of Andrea really, she's done a good job.<sup>24</sup>

Kerry's commentary moves subtly between local and national realities to indicate the wide-scale structural transformations and shifts in cultural attitudes that need to occur in order to combat racism not just in her own city but also across the UK. Her pride in a British African-Caribbean woman whose work is being celebrated across the four city sites of *Small Island Read* also suggests an identification that operates beyond the scale of the local. For some Liverpool readers, then, the choice of a novel centred on London experiences is not a problem: the novel does not need to map directly on to their locale in order for them to produce analyses that connect up with their own knowledge and experience of 'race', class, and gender relations.

Like Kelly, other members of this focus group had a series of interesting and informed perspectives on interracial relations in Liverpool to bring to their interpretations of *Small Island*, and to the discussion of its suitability for the community-wide reading programme. Martin and Margaret (both Caucasian readers) have worked with asylum seekers and trade unionists, attempting to bring groups together to share first-hand stories in order to break through media stereotypes and people's internalized racism. Tracey's professional life as a social worker means that she has encountered various manifestations of racism, including physical violence. When prompted, various members of the group reflected on

these readers to distance themselves from or to denounce racial stereotypes but instead a more risky parodying of them which, depending on how you read it, stresses the absurdity of stereotype (which provokes knowing laughter) or reinforces it (by provoking ignorant laughter). Within a long established book group such as this, where trust among members is firm and readers feel able to voice their opinions safely, it nevertheless appears possible to activate the text as a meeting-place for critical reflection, with some readers approving of Hortense's personality, others disapproving, others changing their minds in an open, dialogic, and ultimately inconclusive conversation.

Transcripts from other group discussions of Levy's novel, and from focus groups with readers in and beyond Liverpool, suggest that a common element of reader response is a consideration of what, if anything, has changed about race relations and racist attitudes in the UK.<sup>22</sup> For a reading group in Chepstow, discussion about the title and its possible reference to 'small-mindedness' prompted this type of response. Meanwhile, Anne, a white middle-aged woman in a Liverpool focus group, was particularly affected by Gilbert's experiences of racism:

[Gilbert] eventually is stationed over in Britain, and at that point you get the, sort of, the interaction with the white British and the different reactions. Again some of them really, embarrassingly, shaming I thought, from my point of view being, you know, a white British person, and ... I, I found it very difficult at times to read it and accept that it still goes on in some ways. This is it, all, all through the book you get the, sort of, this is what happened then. In some ways it's not so different to now, um, in terms of attitude, very often.<sup>23</sup>

Within the context of a racially mixed focus group, it is possible that Anne may have felt compelled to offer this self-aware commentary in order to demonstrate her own tolerance. However, Anne's discomfort and her recognition that racism 'still goes on in some ways' was not atypical.

Readers also made connections between slavery and the present-day use of child labour as well as relating the discrimination suffered by Gilbert and Hortense to the introduction of citizenship tests. They also discussed the representation of new immigrants and asylum seekers in tabloid newspapers as evidence that many attitudes have not shifted, and engaged in discussion of the economic basis of empire and colonial expansion, discussions which segued into considerations of outsourcing to Indian call centres. Admittedly, most of the readers in our studies knew that the selection of *Small Island* was intended to coincide with the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade, but this factor suggests that framing the community-wide read in this way helped to foreground

the contemporary relevance of the novel and thus prompted readers to use a fictional story set in the past to debate current political and social issues. Kerry, an African-Caribbean woman in her late thirties, recognized the potential of this text to unsettle racist assumptions within what Tracey, another focus group participant from the African-Caribbean community in Liverpool, had described as a racially segregated city. She also noted the importance of highlighting the work of a black British writer through the 'Liverpool Reads' / *Small Island Read* programmes – a trenchant reminder that the most visible aspects of British arts and culture within the media and on the high street are still those produced by white elites:

Martin said, you know, if we're talking about breaking down barriers and stuff, we need to tackle ignorance, um, and, and, you know, wild assumptions. And also, you know, let people – because I think that sometimes, people go out of the way to be racist, because of the hatred they've got in themselves. Sometimes people think – do it out of ignorance and if they had the information maybe, they'd think twice about it. You know, so, the – uh, I think [*Small Island*] is useful for breaking down barriers. And it's also great that a black author's been recognised at this level. You know, we've got the whole city – well, readers in the city – reading a book, um ... So I'm quite proud of Andrea really, she's done a good job.<sup>24</sup>

Kerry's commentary moves subtly between local and national realities to indicate the wide-scale structural transformations and shifts in cultural attitudes that need to occur in order to combat racism not just in her own city but also across the UK. Her pride in a British African-Caribbean woman whose work is being celebrated across the four city sites of *Small Island Read* also suggests an identification that operates beyond the scale of the local. For some Liverpool readers, then, the choice of a novel centred on London experiences is not a problem: the novel does not need to map directly on to their locale in order for them to produce analyses that connect up with their own knowledge and experience of 'race', class, and gender relations.

Like Kelly, other members of this focus group had a series of interesting and informed perspectives on interracial relations in Liverpool to bring to their interpretations of *Small Island*, and to the discussion of its suitability for the community-wide reading programme. Martin and Margaret (both Caucasian readers) have worked with asylum seekers and trade unionists, attempting to bring groups together to share first-hand stories in order to break through media stereotypes and people's internalized racism. Tracey's professional life as a social worker means that she has encountered various manifestations of racism, including physical violence. When prompted, various members of the group reflected on



how far urban spaces in the city were 'classed' as well as 'raced'. Kelly noted, for example, 'It's like the city centre's in the middle, then you've got the north working-class, the south working-class, then you've got the middle-class in the, you know, going towards Crosby.'<sup>25</sup> Claire, a white woman in her early thirties, suggested that the south-side was more of 'a melting pot' than Kelly's initial analysis implied and she drew upon her knowledge of local history to underline her own lived experience of a racially mixed working-class neighbourhood:

people seem to accept each other. Of course there's problems and [it] wasn't always peaceful, but it was almost like living in the 1950s, again with that attitude as well, the, the proper old, decent working-class kids out on the street, everybody takes care of each other. ... You've got generations ... of black people – and not just black people, Chinese, Liverpool's the oldest Chinese community in Europe as well. So in, in terms of that, the south end was, was where people, um, kind of settled as well. Sort of through the ports system, they came through the sea ... so I suppose it's, it's much more used to seeing different cultures as well over the, uh, you know the hundreds of years.<sup>26</sup>

These commentaries underline the fact that most people in this group were already deeply engaged with issues of difference before they read Levy's novel.

In common with the (white) women's reading group from Liverpool (quoted earlier) who initially foregrounded class values before 'race' relations in their consideration of Hortense's experiences, these focus group members suggest that *Small Island* can be read 'locally'. For some of the Liverpoolian readers, the lens of class provides a point of entry into the text's representation of racial difference while, for others, class relations are recognized as important co-vectors with 'race' (for example, Tracy's and Claire's comments). These approaches indicate how local knowledge about the intersection of class and 'race' within the city of Liverpool, while it is differently inflected by an individual's own experience and community identifications, can produce a 'local' reading of an apparently non-local story.

It is important to recognize, then, that readers engaged with *Small Island* at different levels, in different ways, and to different ends. As Elizabeth Long has noted within the context of North American book groups:

Literature does have the power to allow some white readers a quasi-experiential expansion of empathy or identification across the racial divide, but it is a fragile power, for it rests on the reader's desire and ability to make an intersubjective bridge as she reads.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the type of site which the novel affords for an examination of racist attitudes and structures is, like Gilroy's sense of lived multiculturalism, contingent on a number of factors, including a reader's own life experiences. Even when white readers make the 'intersubjective bridge' with Hortense and Gilbert by, for example, relating poverty and class-oppression during the 1940s and 1950s to racism, or by reflecting on the parallels between gender and 'race' inequities, the identification may be brief and does not necessarily lead to the development of more liberal views about racial difference. On the contrary, in some instances, unsettling thoughts about difference are 'made safe' by relocating them within the mid-twentieth-century time-frame and social context of Levy's novel. As one reader put it in the Chepstow group's discussion: 'Well I mean men went out to work and women did the cooking you know that's how it was.'<sup>28</sup>

Other readers reported ways in which the act of reading and sharing Levy's novel had been a 'learning' experience capable of transforming the reader's internalized assumptions. Susan, a white focus group participant in Liverpool, had lent the novel to her mother because she was concerned that, as they grow older, her parents have 'got a bit more prejudiced and bigoted'. Susan's other motive – 'to [get] her off Dick Francis at last' – suggests her understanding of a literary hierarchy within which Levy's novel ranks higher than genre fiction and is thus (implicitly) not only better writing, but 'better' for the reader in a moral or educational sense:

It really hit home to my mum that then when [Gilbert] came to this country and was treated as though he wasn't w – yeah he was, you know, uh, discriminated against – um and, and he thought that he was coming home to the motherland in a way to a, a t – a country that would really look after him. That's what struck home to my mum and she talked about that a lot on the phone to me, and that's why she gave the book to her friends, because she, she couldn't believe that bit. It, it was, it was, um, it was an education to her in a way. And she was very shocked about the whole education system that was exported out to the colonies. And I think that's why it – if it makes – you know, if it's made one person sit up and actually address, you know, an innate prejudice, or you know, 'People come here to take our jobs', that sort of thing, I think it's, it's been valuable.<sup>29</sup>

As she describes her mother's response to *Small Island*, Susan also articulates another way in which the novel can be connective when the experience of reading is shared, bridging intergenerational difference. During our research we heard about other kinds of 'connection' around, and through, the discussion and reading of *Small Island*, including the sharing of painful personal stories of poverty and sexism. Within the Liverpool group, where trust has been established among members, it

becomes safe for two women to talk about painful memories because they have been prompted by incidents in the novel. The respectful turn-taking within this group and the 'I hear what you're saying' type of comments which members offered in response to personal stories, demonstrate how, within a book group context, the reading of fiction that explores under-represented experiences and aspects of history can enable the validation of other types of silenced histories within readers' own lives. Differences of class and economic circumstances among group members become articulated and understood through storytelling. Thus, in some cases, Levy's text offers a meeting-place within which readers can elaborate their own subjectivity alongside or even against the grain of the characters represented in the novel.

As our analysis in the second part of this essay suggests, actual readers of Levy's novel use their discussions of the book to establish various types of connection or 'meeting'. These range from the material, face-to-face encounters of the book group itself, to ephemeral moments of inter-generational or cross-cultural connection. For some readers, sharing and re-reading *Small Island* with others enables a critical examination of British imperialism and its contemporary legacies. This appears to be the type of cross-cultural and multicultural work that the sponsors and organizers of *Small Island Read* hoped that the mass-read would perform. However, the dialogic and reflexive processes which lead readers to produce these instances of critique accord more with Gilroy's notion of 'multiculture' as a series of eruptions that occur only to dissipate within everyday life. The provisionality of 'multiculture' and its vernacular formation is mirrored, or rather refracted, in the fleeting and sometimes ambiguous nature of the instances within which readers recognize the textual 'Other', or make connections between institutionally reinforced inequities of gender and 'race'. Rather than producing the 'social glue' that reconnects the citizens of divided cities, then, the mass-read of *Small Island* creates something more akin to fragile threads among those who choose to participate.

Nevertheless, reading *Small Island* together, a project facilitated by the *Small Island Read 2007* programme, offers the potential for meeting-places to be imagined and even actualized. Jenny Hartley has noted that book groups offer 'a forum for a level of debate and conversation not easily found elsewhere' in contemporary society, even if the outcomes of these conversations cannot be guaranteed.<sup>30</sup> In this context, we remain caught between the opening epigraphs of our essay. If *Small Island*, mobilized as it was by the mass-read event, potentially fosters linkages and connections

across cultures, it does not necessarily serve as a bridge, crossover or meeting-point between them.

## NOTES

1. 'Beyond the Book' participant focus group (3) Liverpool, 19 February 2007. In this essay, quotations are taken from interview transcripts. Verbatim transcription practices have been followed by both research teams. However, 'Beyond the Book' received permission to use the first and, in some cases, family names of research participants, while 'Devolving Diasporas' have designated speakers S1, S2, etc., except where it became impossible to assign speech to a particular speaker, hence S\* is employed. For reasons of confidentiality and data protection, none of these transcripts is in the public domain.
2. 'Beyond the Book' interview with Beccy Jones, Bluecoat Arts Centre, Liverpool, 21 February 2007.
3. Both of these projects investigate, with different emphases, contemporary cultures of reading, locally and globally. 'Beyond the Book' is a collaborative project investigating mass-reading events in the UK, USA, and Canada, which was funded by the AHRC 2005-8. A multi-disciplinary team employed mixed methods, including on-line surveys, focus groups with readers, interviews with event organizers, and participation-observation of events in order to investigate shared reading as a social practice and to examine the power relations among the various agents involved in selected community-, region- and nation-wide reading events. See <<http://www.beyondthebookproject.org>> 'Devolving Diasporas' is a three-year AHRC funded project exploring the relationship between reading, migration, and location by recording and analysing book group discussions across the UK and in specific locations in India, Canada, the Caribbean, and Africa. See <<http://www.devolvingdiasporas.com/>>
4. Statistics and demographics cited by Liverpool City Council at: <[http://www.liverpool.gov.uk/News/Facts\\_and\\_figures/index.asp](http://www.liverpool.gov.uk/News/Facts_and_figures/index.asp)> accessed 22 April 2009.
5. James Procter, *Writing Black Britain 1948-1998* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000), p. 3.
6. 'The Reader' organization acts as an umbrella for several reading-centred projects, including 'Liverpool Reads' and the award-winning 'Get Into Reading' programme which has worked with more than 80 groups of people in the Wirral and Liverpool to date. These groups include recovering addicts, young LGBT people, seniors, people with mental health challenges, new immigrants and asylum seekers. For 'The Reader', see: <<http://thereader.org.uk/>> For 'Get Into Reading', see: <<http://reachingout.thereader.org.uk/>>.
7. See, for example, Bea Colley, the 'Liverpool Reads' co-ordinator cited in 'Movie Writer Leads Book Campaign', 25 September 2005 at <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/merseyside/4280592.stm>> accessed 23 April 2009.
8. For a critical analysis of how British publishers constructed the contemporary genre of the 'crossover book', see Claire Squires, *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 147-75.
9. To maintain the connection with schools and children in the city, 'Liverpool Reads' promoted two texts for younger readers alongside *Small Island*: Benjamin Zephaniah's

*Refugee Boy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001) and Mary Hoffman's *Amazing Grace* (London: Frances Lincoln, 1991). Both books deal with issues of racism and/or the experiences of immigrants and asylum seekers in the UK, although in different historical periods from Levy's novel. All three books were adopted by the four cities in the *Small Island Read* project but the selections for younger readers were more heavily promoted by 'Liverpool Reads' on their website, and through many events aimed at young people and school children.

10. See, for example, Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2003); Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002), Heather Murray, *Come, Bright Improvement: The Literary Societies of Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2002).
11. See, for example, DeNel Rehberg Sedo, 'Readers in Reading Groups: An On-Line Survey of Face-to-Face And Virtual Book Clubs', *Convergence*, 1:9 (2003) 66-90.
12. See, for example, Long's discussion of the 'color line' in reading groups, *Book Clubs*, p. xv.
13. *Small Island Read* was planned to coincide with the Abolition of the Slave Trade bicentennial in 2007.
14. Melanie Kelly, 'Small Island Read 2007': Evaluation Report, p. 2.  
<<http://www.smallislandread.com/default.asp>> accessed 09.10.07.
15. Melanie Kelly, p. 7. The event was sponsored primarily by Arts Council England and the Heritage Lottery Fund.
16. Photographs can be found on various pages at:  
<[http://www.bristolreads.com/small\\_island\\_read/index.html](http://www.bristolreads.com/small_island_read/index.html)>
17. As Mette Hjort defines it 'corporate multiculturalism is motivated, not by notions of dignity or worth, but by a set of economic concerns. A certain form of multicultural literacy – the ability to speak a foreign tongue and to grasp the self-understandings of members of certain groups – may be sought for purely self-interested reasons'. In Adam Muller, ed., *Concepts of Culture* (Calgary: U of Calgary P, 2005), p. 137
18. Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Multiculture or Postcolonial Melancholia* (London: Routledge, 2004).
19. 'Beyond the Book' participant focus group (5), Liverpool, 21 February 2007.
20. Long, *Book Clubs*, p. 176.
21. 'Devolving Diasporas' reading group, Liverpool, 8 May 2007.
22. While Liverpool, Hull, Glasgow and Bristol were the hubs for *Small Island Read 2007*, the event radiated outwards to include areas of South West England (e.g. Penzance) and Wales (e.g. Chepstow).
23. 'Devolving Diasporas' reading group, Chepstow, 6 June 2007.
24. 'Beyond the Book' participant and non-participant focus group (6), 22 February 2007.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Long, *Book Clubs*, p. 186.
28. 'Devolving Diasporas' reading group, Chepstow, 6 June 2007.
29. 'Beyond the Book' participant focus group (2), 17 February 2007.
30. Jenny Hartley, *Reading Groups* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), p. 42.

SHAMSHAD KHAN

## Manchester Snow

### I. street by street

can I get into your dreams  
the way you get into mine?

a see-through glass ball  
filled with a handful of water and glitter

I shake the ball in the future  
will I dream you or will you dream me?

I get to know myself better  
every time you answer

and every time my mind goes blank

Manchester everything I love about you now  
I loved about you then

fake gothic promises  
straight talking red bricks

choose me they said choose me  
and I did

you were honest  
openly pretending to be what you weren't

not as big as London  
you mocked me

close enough to Leeds  
let's see if a rose can change colour